

## **NE WELLNESS HOSTS INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORKERS**

**By Stella Archer, Community Worker, LACDMH NE Wellness Center**



On Tuesday, June 25, 2013, at its facility in Highland Park, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health's (LACDMH) Northeast Wellness Center was honored to offer a presentation about its award-winning program to 13 social workers from the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Social Work in Health and Mental Health. The visiting clinicians represented universities, hospitals, clinics and the military from Norway, Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada and various American cities.

Several of them stated that they chose to visit NE Wellness Center in order to learn about integrating recovery model principles with medicine. Many were interested in how clients' goals are incorporated into the Wellness Center's strategic planning, what programs clients initiate, and how client involvement affects personal recovery.

District Chief, Laura Span, MA, LMFT, and Mary Gonzalez-Veleta, PSW I, outlined differences between medical model treatment and the Wellness Center's recovery model treatment. Emphasis on client community integration and self-sufficiency is supported by the Center's programs. Clients participate in numerous conferences, trainings and community resource fairs as well as take part in the client council, Positive Visions and create fundraisers for special projects and events. Planning and organization is done by the clients with guided support by the staff. Clients also create and co-facilitate several groups. This builds self-sufficiency, practical capabilities and fosters self-respect.

Dr. Maria Aguilar spoke of her commitment to education and clients' physical health: "The more clients understand their mental illness and its symptoms, the better able they are to make informed choices about their care and symptom management." She also stated that improved physical health supports improved mental health. "The Wellness Center treats the whole person – body, mind and spirit."

A social scientist from Oslo, Norway, expressed surprise at how involved Wellness clients were in their own recovery and how open the LACDMH culture is to serving their self-determined goals. A social worker/Lt. Commander from the Canadian navy commented: "It'll be a challenge to integrate these practices into our hierarchical system, but it's clearly an effective, successful treatment approach."

The Wellness Center's guests also heard recorded testimonials from clients and presentations from Mita Cuaron, RN, and Irma Vallejo, CW, on the enormous success of the art therapy groups. These groups have sprouted client art exhibitions, connections with other art organizations in the community, and illustrated personal stories in the form of books.

These esteemed guests enthusiastically stated that they would take back to their home organizations renewed commitment to recovery model principles. They appreciated receiving new ideas on how to develop programs which firmly incorporate their clients' goals for individual, whole person recovery.